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The Organization Spook

by Peter Grier

By the fall of 1944, Mario Morpurgo had discovered that the life of a secret agent was not all trench coats and smokey-eyed blondes. An operative for the U.S. Office of Strategic Services (OSS), Morpurgo had parachuted into German-occupied southern France on August 11. Upon his arrival he found the local Resistance fighters more concerned with internal politics than with battling the enemy. In quick order his commanding officer was captured, his truck was commandeered by the Gestapo (he was in it at the time), and he was ambushed by his own men. Fortunately for Morpurgo, his men were very poor shots.

Moving south to work with Italian partisans battling Mussolini, the young OSS man lived for weeks on nothing but boiled sheep, and often found himself deserted by his *paisanos* at the first sound of gunfire. "Being of Italian origin it is most painful for me to make this statement," said Morpurgo in his mission report, "but I really was surprised and ashamed of their behavior." One of his most irritating problems, however, had nothing to do with the situation behind enemy lines. Apparently the radio operators at the OSS base in Algiers who received Morpurgo's clandestine communications had the work habits of Commerce Department clerks. "The receiving operators seemed to be rather in a hurry to finish and go home, and several times they cut the broadcast just saying they had to go, without bothering about giving an extra appointment time," complained Morpurgo. "On Sundays it was almost impossible to make contact... they never listened to the emergency calls at one o'clock in the morning."

In films and spy novels, secret services are almost always efficient. The KGB, CIA, and MI6 are shown moving with an institutional agility IBM managers can only envy; secret weapons are ready on time, and never seem to need maintenance; threats are quickly identified and attacked; and the word "budget" never, ever passes anyone's lips. In this respect Bond-type adventure novels differ but marginally from the

Peter Grier is a staff writer in the Washington bureau of the Christian Science Monitor.

more "authentic" LeCarre school of espionage fiction. In the former, the hero gets to either ski or wear a tuxedo en route to saving Judeo-Christian civilization; in the latter, western agents are morally troubled, less athletic, and more poorly dressed—but also ultimately successful.

Perhaps because of these portrayals, to many people actual secret services are awesome agencies, capable of accomplishing almost any deed, devious or otherwise, with dispatch. This attitude at times is taken by those who should know better. A friend of mine, a man with extensive State Department experience, believes the CIA knows who is behind El Salvador's death squads. When asked why, he sighs as if the question were utterly naive and says, "Come now. They have to know."

Any old spook can attest that there's no bureaucracy like a secret bureaucracy. Games are routinely played at the CIA and other intelligence agencies that are remarkably similar to the turf-protecting, memo shuffling, budget protection, and other bureaucratic games that go on at the Department of Agriculture. The only difference is that, because the secret agencies have no reason to fear public disapproval, their bureaucracies are often *more* chaotic. This is particularly disturbing when one considers that at secret agencies the stakes are higher; after all, the collection of intelligence is an activity fraught with more danger than the administration of farm price supports.

Playing musical desks

Power struggles over spying, especially between agencies, can be "peculiarly savage," notes Anthony Cave Brown, a biographer of William J. ("Wild Bill") Donovan, founder of the OSS. I have been reading quite a bit about Donovan and the OSS lately in a cramped room on the 13th floor of the National Archives as I have rifled through box upon box of OSS operational records. These documents, just declassified by the CIA, provide an account of the day-to-day life of a modern spy agency perhaps more detailed than any ever made public by the U.S. government. They describe great bravery and violence—as well as agents entangled by red tape,

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